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How EFL Learners from China and ASEAN Countries Politely Express Disagreement in an English Context: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This paper aims to make a comparative study of cross-cultural communication upon a special speech act- "disagreement". 38 undergraduates from China and 30 undergraduates from ASEAN countries were involved. They responded to the DCT (discourse completion test). Five contexts were selected and detailed descriptions of the scenarios were given. Social distance and gender were selected as the main variants in this study. From the results, we found that both groups of undergraduates generally tend to use the same politeness strategies according to the same social distance, but gender was a more significant factor in politeness strategies adoption among EFL learners from ASEAN countries. Females tend to use negative strategies more than males do. We can conclude from the results that EFL learners from China and ASEAN countries incline to adopt the same politeness strategies in English context, but females from ASEAN countries are less likely to say "no" directly to express their disagreement compared to their counterpart. Those findings may offer reference to both sides during the pragmatic occasions of communicating.

Keywords: Disagreement; Politeness Strategies; Social Distance; Gender; ASEAN EFL Learners

1 INTRODUCTION

Cooperation between China and ASEAN countries, which involves almost all aspects of public affairs, has never been more intense. Thus considerable amount of overseas students from ASEAN countries have chosen China as their destination to study abroad. Their incapability of speaking or writing in the Chinese language is the main barrier for interaction with the local ones. English has been chosen as their communicative tool. However, both as EFL learners, the two parties have found confusions frequently during their conversations, especially when it comes to "disagreement".

As a special speech act, disagreement has been argued as "an act may involve actively defending one's opinion, attacking another's position, or quietly withholding approval" (Edstrom, 2004, P.1499) or an act of " a re-dressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face: his want to have his freedom of actions unobstructed and his attention unrestricted" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, P.129). Therefore, its application in communication requires a high level of pragmatic competence, otherwise, it may generate pragmatic failure.

Different adoptions of politeness strategies can be induced by variant factors. There have been plentiful previous studies conducted upon this issue, and most of them are comparative case studies. For instance, Garcia (1989)'s findings show that L1 speakers prefer non-confrontational stylistic devices while L2 speakers use more confrontational devices in role-play situations of expressing disagreement and requesting; while in Beebe and Takahashi (1989a, 1989b) research, compared to Americans, Japanese people are surprisingly not always more reluctant to adopt a direct approach, but this mainly happens when they are facing a lower social status people (child,

subordinate, etc.). The effect of gender should also be taken into consideration, Keshavarz et al. (2006) found that even in the same context, people tend to make different choices of refusal strategies due to the impact of their genders besides their cultural background.

Simply put, although different approaches of "disagreement" have been studied in multiple dimensions, little attention has been paid to the comparative investigation between Chinese and people from ASEAN countries. Studying how this special speech act are performed by people coming from these two different cultural groups will shed light on the cross-cultural pragmatic research and even offer practical advice in the actual communicative occasions.

From the foregoing discussion, the research questions can be presented as follows:

(1) How do EFL learners from China and ASEAN countries perceive social distance? Do social distance and gender influence their choice of politeness strategies of expressing disagreement?

(2) Are there similarities and distinctions between the two groups while showing disagreement?

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The previous studies on the main issue of this paper have been more or less tied to Brown and Levinson's face theory (1987). In the last few decades, the framework of this face theory that Brown and Levinson have developed has been extensively and intensively applied in the fields of sociolinguistics, pragmatics and even social psychology (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990).

One notable theme in Brown & Levinson's (1987) face saving theory (FST) is face threatening acts (FTAs) which has been formulated into the following strategies:1. Without re-dressive action, baldly; 2. Positive politeness; 3. Negative politeness; 4. Off record； 5. Don't do the FTA. In addition, "social distance" and "power" were considered to be important factors in all cultures.

However, there have been some debates about the comprehensive application of that theory, especially when it comes to some eastern countries. From his research devoted into the Chinese culture, Gu (1990) suggested his set of value inherent maxim, which are self-denigration, address, tact, agreement and generosity. In Yang (2013)'s investigation of the gender difference of refusal strategies in Chinese, female speakers tend to adopt a more polite refusal strategy than their male fellows. Some studies about politeness strategy applied in Vietnam, Malaysia, etc. have been made during the last decade (Tan, 2012; Harun & Rahman, 2005), but few people from ASEAN countries were considered as a whole.

The main issue discussed in this paper is conducted in the context of English, and Brown & Levinson's theory will be adopted as the theory base. During the design of the questions and data sorting process, the traits of Chinese and Southeastern Asian Cultures will be sufficiently considered.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

This study involves 38 Chinese undergraduate students and 30 undergraduate students from ASEAN countries, all of them are enrolled students from the same university-- Guangxi University for Nationalities, thus eliminating the influence of different learning and living environments. Their ages range from 19 to 24. Those who major in English are not included in case the results may be affected by their higher proficiency in the English language. The gender distribution were even (19 males and 19 females in the CS group; 15 males and 15 females in the AS group).

Henceforth, the abbreviations for the Chinese undergraduate students and the undergraduate students from ASEAN countries will be CS and AS, respectively. Similarly, the female and male participants of the former group are CFS and CMS, the female and male participants from the latter group are AFS and AMS.

3.2 Instruments

Because of its efficiency and speediness, DCT (discourse completion task) is employed to gather data in this paper. It is "a controlled elicitation method and an effective means of data collection" (Yan, 2016). Although it doesn't give the researcher the opportunity to observe or participate in a spontaneous conversation, it does give the participants adequate time to contemplate the questions and permits the researcher to control specific variables of the situation. From the above, DCT can be employed as a solid and adequate instrument for this study.

In this study, three situations are chosen and listed as follows:

Situation 1: You and your roommate are talking about a movie which has just been released, your roommate likes it very much but you don't at all. What would you say to your roommate?

Situation 2: Your teacher asks you to finish an assignment which you think is not necessary and has no benefit to your future career. What would you say to your teacher?

Situation 3: You meet a stranger on the street who asks you for a favor, but it was not a right time or condition for you to help him, what would you say to the stranger?

TABLE 1 DISCOURSE COMPLETION TEST DESIGN

STDs	Recipient	Social Distance	Description
STD 1	Roommate	-D	Criticizing
STD 2	Teacher	+D	Reacting to a request
STD 3	Stranger	++D	Refuse to offer help

As Table 1 illustrated, in these three situations, three different types of people were selected to represent different "social distance" (i.e., the roommate: equal and close social distance; the teacher: close relationship but with higher social status, which means medium social distance; the stranger: definite distant social distance), which is one of the control factors. The topics and descriptions of the questions listed are very close with the usual conversations that the participants may encounter frequently in their actual daily lives. Moreover, since gender has been taken into consideration as an important control factor, the participants are also required to indicate their genders before answering the questions.

3.3 Data Collection

Copies of a questionnaire including the three situations above were handed out to the participants respectively. They were required to respond to each situation as they would in actual conversations. In order to ensure the authenticity and validity of the data collected, the investigation was performed during the participants' break between lessons and supervised by their teachers. Before writing down their answers, they were asked if they had fully understood the questions. Additionally, the whole process was anonymous, thus reducing the psychological pressure of the participants.

3.4 Data Analysis

The participants' answers to each situation were sorted into the following five categories accordingly: direct strategy, negative politeness strategy, positive politeness strategy, implied strategy and avoidance strategy (Yan, 2016). Some answers difficult to be sorted would be referred to another professor who also studies in the area of pragmatics for a second opinion. IBM SPSS 21.0 was used to check if there were significant variations in the strategy between the two groups of different cultures, then between the two different genders of each culture group respectively.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Disagreeing with a Roommate

In this situation, participants were asked to give opposite opinion when a roommate gave high praise for a movie.

TABLE 2 DISTRIBUTION OF FIVE STRATEGIES ADOPTED IN DISAGREEMENT WITH A ROOMMATE

Strategies	CS	Percentage	AS	Percentage
Direct strategy	13	34.21	10	33.33
Negative politeness strategy	9	23.68	6	20.00
Positive politeness strategy	7	18.42	6	20.00
Implied strategy	4	10.52	5	16.67
Avoidance strategy	5	13.15	3	10.00

From Table 2, we can see that direct strategy was the most chosen strategy for both groups, 34.21% of CS decided to use a direct way to express their disagreement while a similar percentage of 33.33% appeared in the AS group. Most people from both groups adopted the most direct strategy of disagreement when they are facing a person who has close relationship with him/her. Independent Sample t-test showed that no significant variations were found in the results (P>.05). Meanwhile, the least chosen strategy of CS group was implied strategy which took up 10.52% of the group, while in the other group, avoidance strategy (10.00%) was the least favored one. However, what is notable is, the difference was subtle with only one participant.

4.2 Disagreeing with a Teacher

In this situation, participants were asked to give opposite opinion when a teacher arranged an unnecessary assignment.

TABLE 3 DISTRIBUTION OF FIVE STRATEGIES ADOPTED IN DISAGREEMENT WITH A TEACHER

Strategies	CS	Percentage	AS	Percentage
Direct strategy	2	5.26	1	3.33
Negative politeness strategy	16	42.10	13	43.33
Positive politeness strategy	6	15.79	5	16.67
Implied strategy	5	13.16	3	10.00
Avoidance strategy	9	23.68	8	26.67

Table 3 showed that the majority of each group selected negative politeness strategy as their first option if they disagree with their teacher, who has higher social status than the participants. In the application of this strategy, the CS tend to use replies like “Sorry, Sir, but I think this assignment is not really necessary” or “ I can’t finish it on time, because I have got other homework to do”, the AS group prefer to use the same way to express their dissatisfaction. Surprisingly, the avoidance strategy was not the least chosen strategy but the second most, this can reflect a phenomenon that most students chose to use a polite yet direct way to inform the teacher about their disagreement, but quite a few others would just sit silently and say nothing about it.

4.3 Disagreeing with a Stranger

In this situation, participants were asked to refuse a stranger’s request of asking for a favor.

TABLE 4 DISTRIBUTION OF FIVE STRATEGIES ADOPTED IN DISAGREEMENT WITH A STRANGER

Strategies	CS	Percentage	AS	Percentage
Direct strategy	5	13.16	2	6.67
Negative politeness strategy	20	52.63	10	33.33
Positive politeness strategy	12	31.58	15	50.00
Implied strategy	1	2.63	3	10.00
Avoidance strategy	0	0	0	0

Table 4 revealed that, the majority (42.10%) of CS chose to show their incapability to offer their help with polite words and a little regret, which was considered to be a negative politeness strategy application. For example, “I am

sorry, but I am in a hurry" was the most frequently seen answer in the questionnaire. Meanwhile, their counterpart who uses this strategy only took up 33.33% of the whole group, with 19.3% lower. The most chosen strategy of AS group was positive politeness strategy, among the answers of this group, reaction like "sorry I can't help you now, but you can ask the policeman over there" reduced the possible negative impact of this FTA.

4.4 Gender Difference in CS (Chinese Undergraduate Students)

In this section, different disagreement strategy adopted by both genders of the CS group were analyzed.

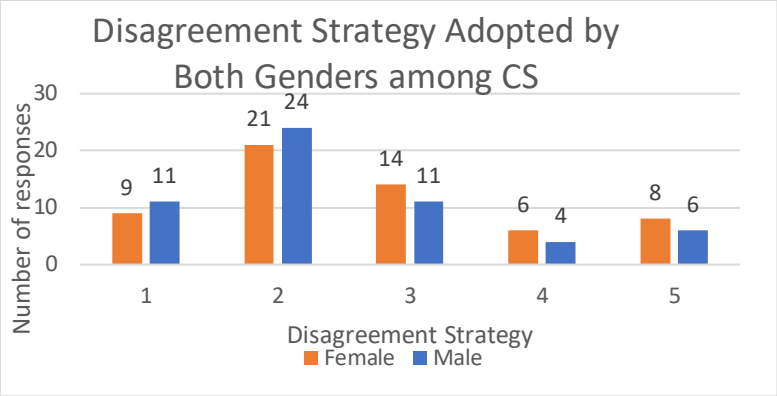

FIGURE 1 DISTRIBUTION OF FIVE DISAGREEMENT STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY BOTH GENDERS IN THE GROUP OF CS (19 FEMALES & 19 MALES).

Note: 1=Direct strategy; 2=Negative politeness strategy; 3=Positive politeness strategy; 4=Implied strategy; 5=Avoidance strategy

As Figure 1 showed, the frequency of each strategy adopted by each gender in the CS group was quite even with 3 responses of difference at most. The most frequently chosen one of both CFS and CMS was related to Negative politeness strategy, in which their responses differ slightly. The differences mainly exist in the politeness degree of word choices. Females tend to use more polite words, and would express their "decorated" disagreement with a gentler approach. For instance, compared to males' direct "sorry", a notable number of females would use "I am so sorry, but..." to reduce the negative impact of their FTA. The findings echoed the previous study of Yang's (2013), in which she stated "the greater preference for mitigated strategies on the part of females should be noticed" (Yang, 2013, P934).

4.5 Gender Difference in AS (Undergraduate Students from the ASEAN Countries)

In this section, different disagreement strategy adopted by both genders of the AS group was analyzed.

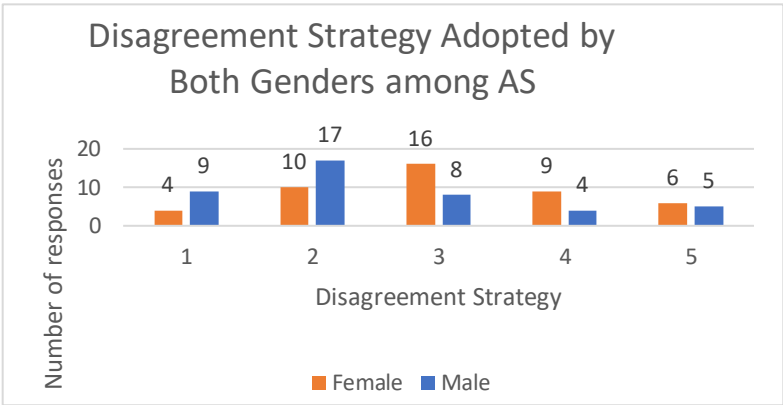

FIGURE 2 DISTRIBUTION OF FIVE DISAGREEMENT STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY BOTH GENDERS IN THE GROUP OF AS (15 FEMALES & 15 MALES).

Note: 1=Direct strategy; 2=Negative politeness strategy; 3=Positive politeness strategy; 4=Implied strategy; 5=Avoidance strategy

Figure 2 shows that among the five strategy adoption frequencies, there is a distinctive gap between the first two relatively direct strategies and the latter two more euphemistic ones. AMS tend to use direct and negative politeness strategy much more frequently with approximately half amount higher than their counterpart. AFSs' adoptions of positive politeness and implied strategies unexpectedly ascended with males falling halfway behind. The distribution of both genders using the last avoidance strategy was quite even. These findings may reflect the credibility of Tan (2012)'s studies of Vietnamese.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, a comparative study of politeness strategies for disagreement adopted by CS and AS has been conducted. The study was performed under three situations with distinctive social distance as well as the gender differences.

In the circumstances of showing disagreement, Chinese students and students from the ASEAN countries tend to adopt the same politeness strategy to the recipients: direct strategy was the most favored strategy when the participants of both groups were facing a roommate; they all tend to utilize the negative politeness strategy to express their reluctance when a teacher gives out unnecessary assignment; when a stranger required help, which was not allowed at the moment, CS participants would show their refusal by adopting negative politeness strategy and AS the negative politeness strategy. Their tendencies of choosing strategy to cope with the condition of disagreement tend to be in the same pace. These findings were consistent with the previous studies made by Tan (2012) and Yan (2016). Yan argued that Chinese EFL learners were more inclined to be influenced by social distance compared to native English speakers, and their politeness degree was in direct proportion to social distance; Tan's study also verified the same conclusion between Vietnamese and native English speakers. However, researchers seldom consider people from the ASEAN countries as a whole in the field of pragmatics, not to mention making comparative study between them and Chinese. This study sheded some lights on this aspect through some relative data.

In this study, gender was also considered to be a significant factor that contributes to the usage of different disagreement strategies. Chinese female students and their male peers adopted each strategy rather equally. On the contrary, the AFS tended to use less aggressive way, such as positive politeness strategy and Implied strategy, to express their disagreement while the AMS favored the direct strategy and negative politeness strategy. Generally, those findings were in accordance with the previous studies (Tan, 2012; Yang, 2013; Yan, 2016), but the gap between CFS and CMS has a gradual tendency to vanish in recent years.

One of the limitations of this study was insufficient number of participants and errors may exist in the collected data, thus making the results only tentative. As for the other limitation, both social distance (D) and social power (P) were listed by Brown and Levinson as crucial factors to all cultures in formulating FTAs. However, due to the constraints of time and survey scale,social power was not introduced in this study. As for the other limitation, while both social distance (D) and social power (P) were listed by Brown and Levinson as crucial factors to all cultures in formulating FTAs, social power was not introduced in this study due to the constraints of time and survey scale)Despite the limitations above, this paper still shed light upon the disagreement strategies of cross-cultural research. Furthermore, it also provided some contributions to the favorable practical communications in all aspects between people from China and ASEAN countries.

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